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ABSTRACT

A new classification is needed which would not prejudice the boundaries of art, one that would bring together in one place the literature on every sort of material artefact, tool, and artwork, without distinction. Within this grand class of artefacts, the sub-arrangement would, as far as possible, respect the integrity of individual cultures. Only at the level of the culture or society would artefacts need to be evaluated on an art-tool axis, and it could be left to the individual art library or cooperative acquisitions network to decide how far along that axis it wished to proceed--at what point, that is, a category of artefact ceased to qualify as art. (Author)

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THE PROBLEM OF THE ARTEFACT:

SUBJECT LIMITS OF THE ART LIBRARY

by

Trevor Fawcett

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The problem of the artefact:
subject limits of the art library

by

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Introduction

A work of art can be experienced and examined, whereas art itself cannot. 'Art' is an abstract idea.

It is true of all the major subjects into which human knowledge and understanding are classified (in encyclopaedias, bibliographic systems, libraries, etc.) that they cannot be defined ostensively. One cannot point to 'Art' or 'Science' or 'Religion'; only to certain manifestations of artistic, scientific or religious activity. The boundaries between abstract subjects are not natural and fixed, but conventional and shifting. Between different subjects, different kinds of human perception, there is constant tension. Often the various territories of subjects overlap uneasily. From time to time new subjects establish themselves on the boundaries, or annex parts of older subjects

of change.

Libraries, being conservative institutions at heart, naturally regard any radical modification of subject categories as disruptive. Indeed their stubborn defence of traditional subject patterns may succeed for a time in delaying general acceptance of a transformed world view. But in the long run institutions that fail to adjust to conceptual change become increasingly at odds with contemporary modes of thought, hence less and less effective and relevant. The subject organisation of most of our libraries (excepting those geared to technical information services) still derives in essentials from the academic consensus of the later nineteenth century. It would be astonishing if, a turbulent hundred years later, the map of knowledge needed no re-drawing. And surely it does. In many areas the territorial conflicts and uncertainties of demarcation are quite evident.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to reconsider the subject limits of the visual arts library. That is to say, the discussion is about a theoretical entity. It does not necessarily propose a model for an actual art library - unless perhaps a national collection of art literature or a network for co-operative acquisition. The subject profile of any particular art library may be at once broader and narrower than that of the theoretical library, for it must reflect not only an external consensus of what seems appropriate, but also internal practicalities and specific local requirements. Naturally this does not absolve the individual library from re-assessing its own policy.

What is art?

thousand years and the proposed solutions are legion. Strictly this is not a single question but a bundle of interrelated questions. Is there some 'aesthetic' quality which serves to distinguish the arts (including poetry, drama, music, etc.) from the non-arts, and if so what is its nature? Which are the special characteristics of the visual arts alone? Is there a hierarchy within the arts or within the visual arts? How is 'good' art to be told from 'bad' art? And so on.

None of the Greek philosophers who raised such questions attempted systematic answers; but scattered among their writings are statements about art and beauty which fundamentally determined the course of future debate - including some of its contradictions. For the messages transmitted from the Attic and Hellenistic worlds are themselves contradictory. On the one hand the arts bring men closer to the divine. Contemplation of the harmony, the order, the unity in diversity manifest in works of art, transcending merely sensuous pleasure, enables mortal man to glimpse the absolute of perfect beauty. On the other hand, the arts simply mirror (almost magically sometimes) the world of appearances: far from being gateways to ultimate reality, they present the illusion of an illusion. It is clear that between these two views of art, transcendent and mimetic, there is a latent opposition; just as there is between the idealist philosophy of Plato and the more relativist approach of Aristotle which took account of the psychological response of spectators or audience.

The artist's status was also ambiguous. The Greek or Roman artist normally counted as a craftsman. He was classed along with shoemakers, carpenters, and other skilled trades. Although the divinely gifted Phidias and Praxiteles, creators of a canon of unsurpassable ideal beauty, might be granted

their superiority to ordinary workmen, it was nevertheless a craft that they pursued. The gulf between the manual arts (demanding physical effort) and the liberal arts (purely mental) still hindered any equation of architecture, sculpture and painting with mathematics, logic, music and poetry.

Explanations of art in terms of ideal beauty (or, its lesser variant, significant form) persisted into our own century. But by then the study of aesthetics had emerged as a branch of philosophy in its own right, and a host of alternative theories of art had arisen. Eighteenth-century English philosophers, for example, emphasised the aesthetic reactions of the spectator. They claimed that human beings possess a special mental faculty (or taste) capable of receiving aesthetic sensations during the disinterested contemplation of works of art. That is, they regarded art as a psychological phenomenon in which subjective factors like memory, association of ideas, and imagination play a major part.

By contrast, Romanticism strongly tilted the balance towards the creative artist, asserting the pre-eminence of his imagination and feeling as expressed in the highly charged work of art. This Romantic insistence on originality, genius, the free outpouring of emotion, stemmed partly from a complete transformation in attitudes towards the artist's rôle. From Classical times and throughout the Middle Ages the (visual) artist had remained an artisan - notwithstanding the respect certainly paid to the master-masons of Gothic cathedrals or the prominent signatures of mediaeval sculptors on their works. It is perhaps the public attitude to Giotto that marked the first sign of change, while the careers of a Raphael, a Michelangelo, a Rubens, indicate further stages in the improvement of the artist's social standing.

renaissance and baroque, by dwelling on the intellectual or inventive aspects of architecture, sculpture and painting, gradually promoted those genres to the rank of liberal arts - though at the expense of depressing the 'minor' or 'useful' arts to an inferior position. After about 1700 the sciences hived off to follow their own separate course of development, leaving the residue of liberal arts (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, oratory, dance) in a new grouping, the 'fine arts', whose common characteristic was agreed to be a concern with beauty. The establishment of academies at this period gave institutional blessing to the distinction between the fine arts and the useful arts (hence the Royal Academy of Arts with its rigorous exclusion of engravers), and at the same time boosted their members' status. With increased prestige and sometimes more economic independence, the artist was in a position where he might, at least tentatively, begin to state his terms and indulge his artistic preferences. As the trend continued, the nineteenth-century artist was more and more inclined to see himself as a special figure: a dandy, a bohemian, the prophet or herald of a new social order; certainly as a free agent and potential innovator. Meanwhile theories of art were abundant. Art was emotional infection. It was psychic release or the means of spiritual integration. It was the sublimation of libido. It was the persistent critique of cultural values. Art could now exist for its own sake. It no longer needed to imitate nature; if anything, as Oscar Wilde pointed out, things were the other way round.

The twentieth century complicated matters yet more. Art was now often given a social explanation, sited in a cultural context. It could be thought of as a form of social communication. Its iconological and symbolic features might be emphasised, or

it could be regarded - in structuralist terms - as primarily a system of cultural signs. For Marxists art was part of the superstructure erected on a base of socio-economic power relations.

Not unconnected with all this, the domain of art continued to grow, and ^{the} idea of the artwork became inextricably entangled with the artefact: matters central to this discussion. These tendencies perhaps date from the mid-nineteenth century, when already a sailing ship or a machine could be viewed as a work of art. The Arts and Crafts movement tried with some success to exalt the handcrafted work. Functionalist theory - with its advocacy of precision, elimination of redundant detail, relation of form to purpose, mass production - did the same for industrial design. Already the claims of photography to be an art had caused interminable controversy; soon it seemed almost de rigueur that every fresh taboo-flouting manifestation of the avant-garde should be greeted with arguments about its admission to the ranks of art. Meanwhile, dealers and museums had begun to put on public show such items as Palaeolithic carvings, African ancestor figures, child paintings, psychotic art, collages, abstract and Constructivist works, even readymades: all of which posed further questions about aesthetic categories. Even if Duchamp's point was ideological rather than artistic, what was it that made the difference between his notorious Fountain and the exactly similar object in the sanitary-ware showroom? Supposing the object were not even man-made - a curiously shaped pebble from the beach, say, or an enticing landscape seen fleetingly through a train window?

These acute philosophical difficulties were exacerbated once more by post-war developments: by the implications of Pop art, Formalism, Conceptual or Process art; by the evanescent

performance that sometimes left no documentary trace, or the solid artefact that repudiated all semblance of artifice. The only common factor in much avant-garde art appeared to be its need for a buttressing of critical theory external to itself. So it is little wonder that a number of aestheticians took refuge in Wittgenstein's suggestion that concepts like art (his own example was 'game') are essentially open-textured and undefinable, even though the instances of those concepts may bear family resemblances ('Familienähnlichkeiten'), explained as 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing'. More recently this rather negative position has been under attack in its turn, Art, it has been counter-proposed, is whatever is sanctioned as such by the ever-changing 'artworld' of critics, artists, historians, collectors, etc. Alternatively, art is the particularity that stands out against a background of ordinariness, somehow communicating experiences of quality and quiddity, somehow capable of evoking delight, or emotion, or shock. As music is to the soundscape that envelops us, so is art to our visual environment. And likewise for E.H. Gombrich, whose subtle psychological theory is based on the idea of perception controlled largely by mental schemata and processes of anticipation, projection, matching or mis-matching, art seems to be some special zone of fascination within a context that is otherwise perceptually dull.

Art history and associated disciplines

The philosophical approach (sketched above in an all too summary fashion and neglecting the ethical view of art entirely) seems to offer little help in defining the subject scope of the art library. It may be more fruitful then to consider the actual scope of subjects like art history, archaeology, social

all regard the artwork/designwork/artefact as prime evidence for their discipline.

Art history is made concrete in the art library. The latter - insofar as it mostly contains texts about art and illustrations of art (and so is not a general picture library with images of all kinds) - is fundamentally art historical in character. (The material that is solely of interest to the practising artist or designer is not likely to predominate.) Assuming the library to be fairly comprehensive and long-established, its shelves will bear vivid witness to the changing styles and preoccupations of art history. Sampling the publications from different periods would show too that the interests of art history, whatever the fluctuations in academic fashions, have tended constantly to broaden.

The expansion of art history as a subject in its own right, especially in the last three decades, has been obvious. The increasing numbers of scholars and research students have affected art libraries in various ways: in demands for improved subject coverage and services; in the surge of worthwhile literature published; and in ever-spreading research interests as scholars foraged in the neglected dark corners of the past for original topics to explore. Meanwhile the international art trade - successfully riding two world wars and economic slump - was also setting a brisk pace of innovation. Dealers, collectors, galleries and museums repeatedly embraced new areas of acquisition and then expected art history to provide the justification. They were aided by the ceaseless flood of archaeological and ethnological finds that continued to stretch aesthetic boundaries, and by the novel challenges to art's permissiveness flung out by each latest avant-garde. Almost

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The potential range of art history is now vast, matching art itself. A Bronze Age sword, an eighteenth-century firework display, the structure of a Bedouin tent, a press photograph, the styling of motorcycles.... are as admissible for study as a Rembrandt etching or the cathedral at Chartres. The Positivist tradition, reinforced by a general sociological climate of thought, turns the artwork into a document of the past: either a representative artefact in a supposed chain of technical or stylistic or iconographic development; or a direct, authentic utterance of some artist responding to his cultural situation and craft practices more than to creative originality. At its extreme this view makes art a matter of historical necessity and seems to hint that a past society may be reconstructable from its extant artworks and tools much as a dinosaur can be from a few vertebrae and fossilized footprints. The powerful tendency to consider the work of art first and foremost as an artefact has been abetted by the great development in the study of anonymous art. Before this century art history was centred mainly on artistic personalities - the biographies, authentic oeuvres, influence, schools, of named artists who often signed their works and who were mentioned in written documents of their time. In other words it was restricted to Classic ancient art and Western (European) art from about the Gothic period onwards. The modern additions to the field of research have largely concerned the art of unknown creators from Prehistory, Late Antiquity to the Romanesque, non-Western and vernacular traditions, and in applied or decorative arts. And while many outstanding examples of anonymous art have been admired as unique expressive objects with their own precious aesthetic value, it is probably still true that the prevailing view of it is archaeological or ethnological.

The discipline of archaeology, like art history, has evolved and broadened during this century. Some archaeologists claim that it is less a subject discipline than a set of techniques - 'dirt archaeology' (fieldwork, find spot and stratigraphic recording, marine exploration, etc.), followed by laboratory and museum work (radiocarbon dating, pollen counting, taxonomy, spatial analysis, etc.). But in fact archaeology is more ambitious than this, for it is about the whole of man's material culture and its interpretation. The work of art considered as an artefact therefore comes under the rubric of archaeology, just as archaeology comes under the all-embracing term for the study of human affairs, anthropology. The fact that we tend to regard archaeology and anthropology as more restricted disciplines is the result of their academic development amid older entrenched subjects.

Archaeology has a twin heritage, Classical Humanism and North European antiquarianism. On one side it began with the examination of Roman and Greek remains as physical illustrations of ancient texts. Under Winckelmann's influence the artistic legacy was stressed, especially monumental architecture, sculpture (though in copies as much as originals), vase painting, coins and carved gems. Later the activities of Classical archaeology and Classical art history moved apart, though art history continued to be fed by archaeological discoveries which, since Pompeii and Herculaneum, have opened up whole vanished civilizations - the Aegean, Egypt, the Middle East, Central Asia, ancient India and China, Pre-Columbian America, and the rest. The other side of archaeology grew out of a curiosity about national origins, above all in Britain, France and Scandinavian countries. From this came the standard divisions of the prehistoric or 'text-free' past: Stone Age

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(subdivided Old, Middle and New). Copper-Bronze Age, Iron Age - categories subsequently applied to Mediterranean and Oriental chronology. The two-fold origin of archaeology no doubt helps to explain why the term has a somewhat different scope in different linguistic usages, so that 'archaeology', 'archéologie', 'archeologia', and 'Archäologie' have subtly various connotations. In British usage between the wars, the word was narrowly applied to Prehistory, with emphasis on culture groups, invasions of one group by another, the diffusion of techniques and inventions. More recently British archaeology has spread into the historic period, so that mediaeval buildings and artefacts, vernacular architecture, industrial structures and equipment, the features of the man-made landscape, the palimpsest of urban settlements, have all become branch studies. A similar expansion has happened in other countries and to a point where certain aspects of archaeology seem indistinguishable from historical geography, environmental studies, urban sociology, technological history, and architectural history. The modern archaeologist goes beyond material culture and busies himself with social organisation, population movements, trade and communications, and even the mentalités of the past. Text-aided archaeology and artefact-aided history are surely identical.

Within the social sciences it has been ethnology that has taken most note of the man-made object. The artefacts of tribal peoples were long regarded in the West as mere curiosities, though in the nineteenth century they afforded some scope for speculation about primitive culture. Not until Malinowski and other anthropologists realised the need to study the fast-disappearing cultures of pre-industrial societies on the spot, living and working with tribal communities, could the use and meaning of primitive art objects and

understood. Since then enormous numbers of objects have been transferred to museums, documented, compared, and classified. Field workers have recorded quantities of data on the technical production, symbolic significance, and everyday or ceremonial use of all kinds of artefact, including ephemeral forms like body painting and earth drawings. However it is only in the last decade or so that ethnologists have become seriously interested in art as such: that is, in the aesthetic and expressive values of an artefact - matters formerly left to the art historian and connoisseur, little though these knew about the cultural contexts from which the objects came.¹

Modern anthropology has also undergone the heavy influence of structuralist theory, which has focussed attention on primitive classification, symbolic transformation, artefacts as signs. The taboos that arise at the point where nature divides from culture are often associated with phenomena of art.

Sociology too shows signs of a new interest in art; not only in the artist's rôle or in the hegemonic relations of patronage within Western society, but in aspects of the artwork itself. And whereas original paintings or sculptures do not lend themselves so easily to statistical treatment or reduction to 'social facts', mass art does. Sociological attention has therefore been drawn to the 'image' in its popular forms: photography of course (with its derivatives, film, television, video), the graphic or photographic image in 19th- and 20th-century journalism and advertising, the poster, the caricature, the reproduction, the kitsch object. The photograph is seen as having crucial significance. For Walter Benjamin it succeeded in transforming the very nature of art, since a photographic image lacked the aura of cult, rarity, tradition, permanence, that surrounded every hand-made work of art.² For Roland Barthes

the essence of a photograph is that it can provide a perfect reduction of reality free from any supplementary message of style - which is denied to other arts.³ (Barthes argues that only through deliberate posing of the subject, doctoring of the negative, presentation of the image in a certain milieu, captioning it, is it coded with meanings.) According to a recent criticism, but from a more aesthetic standpoint,⁴ photography is to blame for creating a hunger for cheapened, mechanical, anecdotal images. On this view photography is a second-rate medium, incapable of more than technical competence and rare minor poetry, just a staging-post on the way to cinema. Furthermore it is pernicious in effect, encouraging design-mindedness instead of rigorous artistic thinking.

Finally, the history of photography is also part of the history of technology. This is a familiar kind of overlap, for the relationship between art and its materials and techniques always raises ambiguities. When does building become architecture? At what point does an example of civil engineering begin to count as an aesthetic structure? In which framework do we contemplate industrial design? The point does not need labouring. The emergent subject of design history seems indeed to interconnect with the history of technology at every turn. And how to distinguish a mere tool from an aesthetic artefact becomes more problematic with every day that passes.

Implications

The argument comes to this. Almost any artefact may now be 'aestheticized', i.e. treated as a specimen of art or design. As a direct consequence, all works of art have to be classified with artefacts. Hence there is an indivisible continuum: at one

and the relatively inexpressive, replaceable, useful tool; at the other end the relatively very expressive, unique, useless work of art. The two ends are not in much dispute, but in the middle is a large area of ambivalence where neither the utilitarian nor the aesthetic predominates and which may be seen by different specialists in different ways. To give a single example, vernacular architecture is now of interest to the practising architect, the architectural historian, the historian of construction methods, the archaeologist, the economic historian, the social anthropologist, and the landscape geographer.

As George Kubler has pointed out, our cultural clock is based on ruined fragments and relics, largely material objects that incorporate utility and art in varying mixtures. He therefore proposes a 'history of things', an account of 'all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in temporal sequence. From all these things a shape in time emerges. A visible portrait of the collective identity, whether tribe, class, or nation, comes into being.' ⁵ This seems admirable - at least for earlier centuries and for pre-industrial cultures in general. But could it work for complex modern societies? Gombrich has sounded a warning that art history would be swamped if it tried to deal with the whole of material culture; critical distinctions, value judgments, must establish a hierarchy. ⁶

But are bibliographic classification systems the right place for value judgments? The standard classification schemes used by libraries do enshrine subjective distinctions as to what is or is not art. This results in many artificial and arbitrary unions and separations. It leads to practical difficulties and confusions. What uninstructed learner

guess correctly where libraries might classify books on clocks and watches, stage design, landscape gardening, dress, coinage, arms and armour, heraldry, fortifications, flower arrangement, typography, dolls, household fittings, postage stamps, North American Indian tepees, or the pyramids of Egypt?

The contention of this paper is that a new classification is needed which would not prejudge the boundaries of art. It should instead bring together in one place the literature on every sort of material artefact, tool and artwork, without distinction. And within this grand class of artefacts the sub-arrangement should as far as possible respect the integrity of individual cultures. Only at the level of the culture or society would artefacts need evaluating on an art-tool axis, and it could be left to the individual art library or cooperative acquisitions network to decide how far along the axis it wished to proceed; at what point, that is, a category of artefact ceased to qualify as art.

In traditional classification schemes a covert aesthetic valuation is built in to their structure from the start.⁷ It determines a zone of visual art that is sharply cut off from other material evidence of human activity and expression as subjects of historical, archaeological, anthropological or social inquiry. This division seems arbitrary, unscholarly and unhelpful. An artefact-centred system is therefore proposed as a serious alternative and to help ^{overcome} ~~lessen~~ some of the difficulties of subject fragmentation that art libraries meet constantly.

For references see next sheet

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5. George Kubler The shape of time (New Haven, Conn., 1962).
6. E.H. Gombrich Art history and the social sciences (Oxford, 1975).
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